

Boys Night Out

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Summary: While the girls have a night to themselves, the boys go looking for fun and run afoul of a demon with a taste for young men.

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BOY'S NIGHT OUT

>Written by: Michael K. Donovan
AUTHOR'S NOTE: The character of Gabriel Giles was introduced in a previous story I wrote entitled 'Divergent Paths'.

>
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>Buffy followed Gabriel up the long flight of wooden stairs and gave him a warm smile as he unlocked the door to his apartment.

>"So how did you like the movie?" she asked as they entered and closed the door behind them.

>"Mmm, it was okay, I guess." He shrugged half-heartedly, walking into the entrance archway, "But the British aren't really like that, you know."

>She shook her head in bemused disbelief and hugged him around the waist, squeezing against his side, "Gabriel, NOBODY is like Austin Powers. That's what makes it so funny."

>"If you say so." He chuckled, walking with her through the archway into the main room where he dropped his keys onto an end table.

>He continued into the kitchenette while Buffy hung back in the main room. She noticed a large, wooden moving crate positioned against the wall.

>"Hey, where did this come from?" she asked, indicating the container.

>Gabriel returned from the kitchenette with a small, folded square of paper in his hand.

>"Uncle Rupert was here earlier but he didn't mention any crate." He

looked over the short note with curiosity in his eyes, "I wonder what it is?"

>Buffy pushed on the cubical box, judging its weight, "Maybe you should open it."

>Gabriel pried at the edge of the crate, straining unsuccessfully with his fingertips to remove one of the boards.

>Buffy watched him for a moment before getting fed up and pushing him aside. Striking a sharp blow with the heel of her hand, she shattered one of the top boards. She stepped back and smiled wryly, presenting him with the now-open box.

>"Hope there wasn't anything breakable in there." He commented with raised eyebrows. As he pulled away the remaining boards, his green and gold eyes lit up with pleasant surprise, "Hey, this is all my stuff from Scotland! Uncle Gerritt finally sent it."

>Buffy reached inside and withdrew a black, clay wolf mask. Intricately carved, it was detailed down to the individual hairs on the animal's face. Next, she pulled out a string of tiny bones connected by a shining, black cord.

>"Don't you have anything normal like a baseball mitt or something in there?" she wrinkled her nose at the bones and set them aside.

>"I picked that up in Africa." He explained with a smirk, "It's a battle charm. A priestess gave it to me after I rescued her daughter."

>"Daughter?" Buffy arched a dubious eyebrow at him.

>"She was five at the time." He smiled, digging around within the crate, "Don't you have any mementos from past battles?"

>"Well, yeah, I guess." She shrugged, mildly embarrassed, "But Mister Pointy is a trusted tool of my trade, not leftovers from the Chicken Shack."

>He sighed in amusement and shook his head gently. Looking back into the box, he paused and slowly, reverently, withdrew a rectangular silver picture frame.

>Buffy slipped her hands around his waist again and peered around his arm. The picture was of a younger Gabriel with long, shoulder length hair, dressed in bright, foreign clothes. He sat atop a low stone wall, stretched out and smiling at the camera. Behind him, a breathtaking orange sunset reflected off the ocean, turning the sky into a bright, colorful backdrop of beauty. A dedication was written across the bottom of the photo. 'Good luck in Edinburgh. I promise to write you from Cairo. Keep in touch, Raphael.'

>"Hey, you were pretty cute back then. I like the hair." She mentioned affectionately, giving him a brief squeeze, "Who's Raphael?"

>Gabriel stared at the photo for a moment in silence, "He's my brother."

>"Really?" She smiled, "Do you hear from him much?"

>"No." He shook his head regretfully, "We used to be really tight. He's the only full-blooded brother I have out of the six. But when I moved to Edinburgh, he went to Egypt. I haven't seen or heard from him since." His eyes filled with a distant sadness and he continued to stare at the picture, "He used to take care of me whenever our father was away. I really miss him sometimes."

>She tightened her arms around his waist and pressed her cheek against his back in sympathy. He sighed and placed the photo on the end table and covered her hands in his.

>"I can dig through the rest of this stuff tomorrow. Come on, I'll walk you home."

>Buffy circled around him and smiled in agreement, noting how his

gaze flicked to the picture one last time.

>* * *

>"Oh, come off it, Xander." Buffy caught him by the arm as he attempted to retreat, "I'm not asking for THAT big a favor."

>She had called him earlier that day with a small, undisclosed request and asked him to come over. Always ready to help out a friend, not to mention eager to accept an invitation to set foot inside the girls' dorm, Xander had rushed over right away, but was dismayed to find out what she wanted.

>"It might not seem like such a big favor to you." He countered, "But I see it as a significant sacrifice on my part."

>"What have you got against Gabriel?" she asked, confused, "All I want you to do is take him out for a night of guy-fun. Please? He needs to hang out with his own gender for a change."

>"Did he actually say that?" Xander eyed her skeptically, "Or are you just taking it upon yourself to set up some sort of play date? I know this may be hard for you to believe, but being alone with your boyfriend is not nearly as exciting for me as it is for you."

>"How bad can it be?" she gestured offhandedly, "You burp, you scratch, you watch some mindless sporting event and then you go home. Everybody's happy."

>Xander's eyes narrowed craftily and he smiled congenially at her.

>"All right." He agreed, rubbing his palms together, "I'll spend some quality time with your guy. But there's got to be a trade-off."

>"Trade-off?" Buffy frowned. She didn't like the sound of that.

>"I'll introduce Gabriel to the finer points of male bonding." He nodded, "But you have to include Anya in one of your girl's night outings, get her off my back for a while."

>Buffy's jaw fell slack and she took a step back, "N-now wait a minute, Xander. That's not fair."

>"Oh, come on, Buff." He grinned, enjoying her discomfort, "How hard could it be? You do each other's hair, you criticize a few female celebrities, watch some cheesy chick-flicks and then go home. Everybody's happy."

>Buffy growled and folded her arms across her chest in grudging defeat. He had her cornered. This time. "All right," she agreed, "but you have to make a real effort to be nice to him."

>"Same goes for you. Do we have a deal?" he smiled confidently, holding out his hand to shake hers.

>"Deal." She bared her teeth and squeezed a little harder than was necessary.

>* * *

>"So are we all set for tonight?" Willow piped on the other end of the phone. She was so happy to finally get some time with Buffy, just the girls. Not that she had anything against Gabriel. In fact, she thought they made a great pair, but she missed having her best friend around.

>"Yeah, Will, um, there's something I've been meaning to tell you."

>Willow prepared herself to hear that Gabriel's plans had fallen through and that he was going to take Buffy somewhere fun and exciting, which would leave her in the lurch. Again.

>"Do you mind if I, um, bring a-another girl along with us?" Buffy asked carefully.

>"Another girl?" Buffy didn't have any other female friends, did she?

Unless . . . no, she wouldn't. Not her. "Who?"

>Buffy held her breath for an instant.

>"Anya." She released the name with a rough sigh.

>"You're not serious." Willow couldn't believe what she had just heard, "You can't be. You are, aren't you? Anya?"

>"It's the only way I could get Xander to go with Gabriel tonight." Buffy explained, "He's been kinda down lately. I think he misses his family. I thought a night out with the guys would cheer him up. I'm sorry, Will. I'll SO understand if you want to back out now."

>Willow really wasn't comfortable around Anya, but she felt bad for Gabriel. From all accounts, he came from a large, predominantly male family but since he had returned to Sunnydale, he had been spending much of his time with Buffy. While that association held its own advantages, Willow understood the importance of socializing with one's own gender. There were things she could share with Buffy and not Xander simply because of that simple fact. Besides, she liked Gabriel. Buffy had Girl's Night, he deserved a night out, too.

>"Weeeelll," Willow considered, "You ARE doing it as a favor for Gabriel. And I wouldn't want you to have to put up with her on your own. I guess I could endure for one night."

>"Thanks, Willow. You have no idea how much I am dreading this."

>"Oh, I think I do."

>* * *

>Xander crossed the downtown street on his way home, his hands jammed tensely into his pockets and his mind stuck on the coming evening. Xander and Gabriel. Gabriel and Xander. What could be more uncomfortable than that? Gabriel was a world traveler and a skilled fighter. Xander, on the other hand, had never even crossed state lines and preferred to aid the fight against evil in more of an 'auxiliary' capacity. They came from two totally different backgrounds and had virtually nothing in common. Tonight promised to be a long and trying evening.

>As he turned a corner, the door to a music store opened and a familiar face walked out.

>"Oz!" Xander latched onto the young werewolf's arm, "Thank God you're here!"

>"Hey," Oz looked at him with bland amusement, hefting his guitar in one hand, "I'm touched by your concern, but it's no big deal, really, just a couple of loose frets." "Look, you gotta come hang out with me tonight." He pleaded.

>"Normally, that'd be cool, but I just got my guitar back. I think I'm going to work on a few new riffs I've been thinking about."

>Xander grabbed hold of his arm desperately, "You don't understand. I promised Buffy I'd hang out with Gabriel tonight. Man, don't make me do it alone."

>Oz regarded him silently, seeming to enjoy letting him suffer a little longer than necessary in that reserved way that he had.

>"All right." He finally agreed, "I'm in. Might be kinda cool to see what the Seventh Son of a Seventh Son does for kicks in his free time."

>"Oh yeah," Xander blew out a long breath, "Tonight ought to be a barrel of laughs."

>* * *

>Willow paused with her knuckles poised at Buffy's dorm room door. Neither of them had had much of a chance to assimilate into the

college culture yet, so the plan was for a quiet night indoors for a change. Buffy's roommate was gone for the weekend, making her place the perfect spot to stage their get-together. No one knew how or where the girl had gone, no car had come to pick her up and she hadn't bought a bus ticket, but she was definitely gone. Some people just seemed to find their own means of travel.

>Steeling herself with a deep breath, she knocked politely. Almost instantly, there was mad scrambling inside and the door was jerked open.

>"Willow!" Buffy stood framed in the doorway, "I'm so glad you're here." Behind her, she could see Anya sitting on one of the beds with her back propped up against the wall and a dissatisfied scowl on her face. Great.

>"Hey." Willow waved, stepping inside and holding up a small bag of groceries she had brought, "I brought chips and dip. And some of those little weinies, you know like they have at all those fancy parties."

>Buffy zipped around the small kitchen counter and grabbed up three movies that were stacked on the end.

>"I got stuff, too." She grinned excitedly, "Prepare for a night of total movie hunk meltdown. We have Brad Pitt, Matt Damon and tah-da . . . our crown jewel of the evening, Joseph Fiennes!"

>Anya shifted from her place on the bed and continually flicked through the channels on the small television.

>"I don't know what's supposed to be so interesting about a bunch of men with their shirts off." She complained, "I mean you both have boyfriends. Dealing with one man is frustrating enough, why would you want more?"

>Willow's expression darkened and Buffy raised a staying hand, reminding her of the agreement she had made with Xander.

>"We're not shopping for new boyfriends, Anya." Buffy explained with enforced calm, "That's not the point. It's just something that we can all agree on. Share, you know?"

>"I don't want to share." Anya sighed harshly and rolled her eyes, settling back and flicking through the channels in a futile search for something that would interest her. She pulled her legs up and hugged them, resting her chin on her knees. "I want Xander. What could he be doing tonight that's so important?"

>Buffy turned back to Willow and the auburn haired girl raised her eyebrows resignedly. This was going to be a long night.

>* * *

>Xander stood at the bottom of the long wooden stairway that led up to Gabriel's apartment, looking at it like it was the dead man's mile. Oz walked around from the other side of his van and slipped his keys into his pocket.

>"You ready?" he asked.

>Xander hung his head and his face filled with reticence.

>"Come on, Oz, can't you just tell him I got sick or something and had to stay home?" he implored in a weak voice, "This is going to be like a first class ticket to suck-land!"

>Oz smirked and started up the stairs.

>"I'll cover for you if you want," he shrugged, "but you're the one who'll have to explain to Buffy. I hear she doesn't take kindly to broken promises."

>Xander considered his options and groaned, letting his shoulders sag. Compared to facing the wrath of a Slayer, one measly night out with Mister Wonderful suddenly seemed a lot less bothersome.

Resigning himself, he took to the stairs behind Oz, his feet feeling

like they were encased in cinder blocks at each step.

>After a few knocks, Gabriel answered the door, taking only enough time to let them in before retreating quickly toward the bathroom, his bare feet padding against the tiled floor. He was wearing only a pair of black, pleated pants with a white towel held down tightly over his wet, auburn hair.

>"Sorry I'm not ready. I'll just be a minute." He shouted an apology through the open bathroom door, rubbing furiously at his hair, while readying his toothbrush and awkwardly pulling socks on with his feet, "Uncle Rupert wanted me to run a quick patrol before going out and I ran into a little trouble."

>Xander forced himself to cross the threshold. Oz entered the room ahead of him and looked around with interest at the numerous odd knick-knacks that were artfully arranged about the place.

>"Don't worry about it." Oz shouted over his shoulder, as the bathroom door closed and the sounds of hurried movements and rushing water filtered out. "Was it anything serious?"

>"No." Came Gabriel's shouted reply, "Just a little messy, that's all."

>Xander paused in his nervous wandering around the room and looked down at a discarded bundle of scorched clothing near the doorway. Yeah, messy meaning exciting, dangerous and cool. All of which seemed to be par for the course in the Seventh Son's life.

>He wandered to a set of sliding glass doors that led out onto a small veranda. After taking a moment to peer through the glass, he circled around a plush gray couch and sat down on the edge of it.

>"Man, you think the guy would at least have been ready on time." He grumbled low enough so that Gabriel couldn't possibly hear.

>Oz bent forward and peered into the onyx eyes of a finely detailed wolf mask and smiled.

>"Relax. It's not like we have specific plans or anything." He ran his fingertip over the etched hairs of the mask, "Get a load of all this cool stuff."

>Xander quirked a disinterested expression. He was impressed, but didn't want to show it. Everything looked so foreign here, there wasn't even a television. How could a person live without TV? It was like being in a museum or something. He had never seen anything like most of the objects in the room. God, even the guy's apartment was cool. All Xander had in his meager basement abode that could even be remotely considered decorative was a homemade clothesline and a washer-dryer set.

>He frowned as he studied a waist high post made of wood carved with colorful totem faces. He leaned over until his face was close to that of the top totem and matched its tormented expression.

>"You and me both, ugly."

>As the bathroom door opened, he hastily sat back and folded his hands innocently in his lap.

>Gabriel emerged, fully dressed, wearing a ribbed gray shirt made of stretchy material and black shoes. His hair was still a little damp, appearing darker than usual, but he seemed to be ready.

>"I totally dig the exotic decor." Oz commented, indicating an ornate dagger made of bronze that hung on the wall, "Very cosmopolitan."

>Gabriel smiled at the compliment.

>"Thanks. Most of it just arrived yesterday. There's more back in Scotland, but these are my favorites."

>Xander discovered a worn, brown photo album and casually flipped it

open. Inside were breathtaking photos of many exotic locations, from cities to wilderness. As he flipped through the pages, he couldn't help but notice how many of them featured young women as well.

>"This one's GOT to be at the top of your list." he exclaimed, "Who are all these girls?"

>"Just friends." Gabriel checked himself in a mirror and brushed his fingers through his hair.

>"Girlfriends?" he asked in disbelief, "All of them?"

>"Some of them." Gabriel shrugged, "I never really had much time for girls. My father always kept me too busy."

>Xander neared the back of the album and froze as his eyes fell on a picture of a tall waterfall surrounded by lush greenery and pale mist. Wearing a form fitting swimsuit, an exquisitely beautiful girl with cinnamon shaded hair and deep, dark eyes was perched confidently on the tip of a jagged outcropping of rock with a bright, fearless smile.

>"Wow." He gulped, his jaw sagging open, "Tell me you didn't date her. What is she, like a model?"

>"Not professionally." Gabriel folded his arms loosely across his chest, a slight line forming between his eyebrows, "Her name's Brienne O'Donnell. She's a . . . friend. From Scotland."

>"Any chance your friend might be coming to Sunnydale sometime soon?" Xander queried with a slight leer.

>"If she does you'll have to deal with my brother first." The auburn-haired young man shook his head in negation, "He's been in love with her since he was five."

>Xander's hopefulness fell instantly and he immediately closed the photo album over. It wasn't like he had realistically been expecting to meet the girl, but it was disheartening to be reminded that, even if he had, his chances with her would have been negligible.

>"Thanks, but I'll pass." He handed the album to Gabriel, "And just a piece of friendly advice, bury this thing somewhere deep and NEVER let Buffy find it."

>"Why?" Gabriel frowned, dropping the album onto an end table.

>"Why?!" Xander laughed out loud. "You really DIDN'T have much time for girls, did you? Talk about straight-laced. I would have expected more from an international man of mystery."

>"Hey, I just saw that movie." the auburn-haired young man chuckled then calmed, "I may have been born in England, but I'm not FROM there. I guess I'm not really from anywhere."

>Xander detected a mild note of dissatisfaction in his voice and frowned. What the heck did he have to be complaining about?

>"And straight-laced?" Gabriel continued, his mouth twitching up into a mildly annoyed smirk, "You have no idea, Xander. Since you don't have anything planned, what do you say we check out someplace a little more adventurous than the Bronze?"

>"More adventurous than the Bronze?" Oz echoed with a wry, incredulous smile, "Sounds hard to believe."

>"And where, pray tell, my good man, might that be?" Xander asked.

>"It's called the After Dark. I've been patrolling around there the last few nights." he slipped his hands into his pockets and leaned his shoulder casually against the wall, "Looks like a pretty wild time."

>"The After Dark?" Oz quirked an eyebrow, "That place out on the edge of town? I've heard things can get pretty crazy there. Besides, we'll

never get past the door without ID."

>"Maybe not." Gabriel smirked, "At least not the front door anyway. Still think I'm straight-laced?"

>"Hey, check out Baby-Ripper!" Xander clapped his hand onto Gabriel's shoulder in the first genuinely friendly gesture between them, "I didn't think you had it in you."

>* * *

>Willow sighed in frustration and adjusted her position on the floor, trying to concentrate on the movie. For the sake of Buffy's agreement with Xander, she had been doing her best to put up with Anya's sour disposition. But it was not easy.

>The dark-haired girl sat next to Buffy on the bed, guarding a half-full bowl of popcorn greedily in her lap.

>"You know, if this were real," she mumbled around a mouthful of buttery popcorn, pointing at the screen, "He would have dumped her long ago and just shackled up with her bimbo sister."

>"That's not how the movie goes. I've seen it before." Willow turned on her side, propped on one arm, and frowned at Anya, "Besides, what makes you think guys like him aren't real?"

>"Experience." She answered, leaning sharply over Buffy and reaching for a bag of chips on the floor, "Are there any more of those cocktail weinies left?"

>Buffy's eyes widened in annoyance as her arm and part of her side got squished by the girl's sudden, rude movement. Willow could tell that she was only barely resisting the urge to send the dark-haired girl the rest of the way to the floor.

>"No." Buffy answered, subtly shoving Anya back to her side of the bed, "You ate them all."

>Anya settled back and held the chip bag open, peering inside.

>"Oh, that's too bad." She mentioned, reaching into the bag, "They were really good."

>"I wouldn't know." Buffy grumbled, taking the remote and turning the television volume up a few notches.

>Anya crunched down loudly on her first chip, the sound grating across both Buffy's and Willow's nerves. Witch and Slayer looked to one another with tight lips and narrowed eyes, sharing one single resounding thought between them. Xander was definitely going to pay for this.

>* * *

>Music thumped relentlessly and the air was thick and moist as the three young men entered the club. Gabriel had taken Oz and Xander to a hatch in the roof that he had found during one of his previous patrols and carefully led the way inside. None of the enormous bouncers had seemed to notice as they crept down the stairs and quickly blended in with the crowd.

>The building consisted of a number of rooms that were joined together by long spacious hallways, giving it a cave-like feel. The walls and ceiling had been painted black with hundreds of glittering flecks of plastic pasted to them. Multicolored light continuously flashed and gleamed about, illuminating some areas while casting others into complete shadows. Overhead, carvings of gargoyles and other monsters jutted from the tops of pillars set on the corners. It was a little macabre, but interesting. Only in Sunnydale, Xander smirked to himself.

>"Wow, this is great!" Xander grinned, craning his head back and forth in an attempt to experience the whole place at once, "I've never been to a bar before."

>"Keep a low profile." Gabriel advised, as Xander gawked openly at a passing girl, "I don't want to give any of the bouncers a reason to

come down on us."

>The girl strolled in front of him, intently watching an unaware Gabriel with interest. She slowed as she continued across the Seventh Son's path, catching her bottom lip between her teeth in a demure smile and looking him up and down out of the corner of her eye as she passed.

>Xander frowned, watching the display with a touch of envy.

>"Over here." Oz beckoned, pressing toward the stairs.

>The other two wove through the tightly packed crowd behind him until they found a reasonably open space to stand.

>Oz pressed between two people and stepped up onto the bottom of one of the wooden pillars, hanging to the side and looking over the crowd toward the stage.

>"Hey, check it out," he motioned offhandedly, "There's a band."

>Bright lights flashed and a haze of performance smoke rolled off the platform into the thrashing crowd. Resonant, electrically empowered notes pounded from the amplifiers, energizing the club-goers and vibrating along the walls and floor.

>The band members were all dressed in black cloaks, with deep, shadowed hoods, like monks, save for the singer, a tall, shapely woman wearing a backless, leopard-print tank top and snug, tan leather pants.

>She bounded from one end of the stage to the other, pouring her strong, beguiling voice into the microphone in her hand and throwing her full head of wild, blonde hair around like a weapon. She prowled confidently toward the front of the crowd, sleek and sinuous like a part of the penetrating music, and stretched her arm out languorously with a wolfish smile.

>Xander climbed up on the opposite side of the pillar from Oz and peered over the crowd.

>"God, I've died and gone to rock and roll heaven. And I just spotted the head angel." He sighed in exaggerated admiration, "I wonder what her name is?"

>Oz squinted against the glare and frowned slightly.

>"Silvertongue." He read from the front of the bass drum, "Never heard of 'em."

>Gabriel pressed his back against a wall plastered with bill postings, trying to get a clear look at the singer. Something about the music felt strange to him, the way it thrummed along his skin and sank into his blood. Something that tickled a faint memory in the back of his mind.

>Xander's jaw dropped open, his eyes fastened on a pair of approaching young women. Both blonde-haired and blue-eyed, they were dressed provocatively in tight, short dresses and made up to look exotic and attractive. They were older, perhaps in their early twenties, smiling and giggling to one another as they squeezed through the press. Judging by their flushed faces and slightly off balanced movements, Xander figured that the girls had been drinking some. Mature, liberated outlooks coupled with lowered inhibitions. He couldn't help but smile.

>Xander dropped back to the floor and straightened his tight, long sleeved black shirt. Nervously, he popped the topmost of the shirt's three buttons open, then looked down at the pale skin of his chest and closed it again. The girls were getting closer, heading straight for him. Swallowing nervously, he opened the button again and hastily affected a relaxed posture.

>"Hello, ladies." He smiled winningly.

>One of the pair shot him a haughty look and rolled her eyes while the other ignored him completely. Tottering past, the first slid her palm across the outside of Gabriel's shoulder and grinned up at him brightly.

>"Hi." She breathed, the taint of alcohol on her breath, as her friend giggled close behind her.

>Gabriel waved politely and paid them little heed as they continued past him.

>"How do you DO that?" Xander asked, half with curiosity, half out of annoyance, watching the girls disappear into the crowd, "What is it, like a Seventh Son thing?"

>"I don't know." Gabriel shrugged with disinterest, scanning through the crowd for an empty table, "And being the Seventh Son is not as great as you seem to think it is."

>"Yeah, right," Xander snorted in response, "Let's see, you're as strong, fast and tough as Buffy, you've been trained in more things than I've even heard of and you've got this weird kind of sixth sense. Boy, that sure sounds like it sucks."

>"There's a price to pay for all of that, Xander." Gabriel scowled, "Every night I go out on patrol could be my last."

>"And I could get eaten by a vampire on a trip to the grocery store." The dark-haired young man rebutted glibly, "At least you can defend yourself."

>"There are other disadvantages." Gabriel folded his arms tightly across his chest and turned his eyes back to the crowd.

>"Like what?" Xander demanded, "Face it, you've got it easier than the rest of us and you just don't want to admit it."

>"I wish." He commented ruefully, his eyes becoming distant, "Power comes with responsibility, Xander. Always. And sometimes it's not easy to face up to that."

>Xander had never really considered the down side of being extraordinary. Buffy had sacrificed much in the pursuit of her sacred duty, it only stood to reason that Gabriel had faced similar consequences since deciding to join the fight against the darkness. Maybe that was why he and Buffy seemed to understand one another so well.

>"Hm, so said Uncle Ben to Spiderman." he observed thoughtfully.

>"Who?" the taller boy asked, looking perplexed.

>"You don't know who Spiderman is?" Xander found it hard to believe, "Man, what kind of jammies did you have when you were a kid?"

>"Jammies?"

>"Later." Xander waved him to silence and discreetly indicated someone in the crowd, "Incoming. I think she's got your number buddy."

>"What?" Gabriel turned his head, following Xander's indication.

>A tall brunette dressed in snug-fitting dresspants and a shiny, clinging top making her way toward them. It was hard to determine her age, but there was an air of sophistication about her. Her hair was pulled back into a neat bun and a pair of black wire-frame glasses rested across her delicate nose.

>Gabriel nervously rubbed his palms down along his thighs and shifted uncomfortably on the spot. Xander was right, she was heading directly for him. He briefly considered falling back to the washroom to avoid the girl, but the press of people would have made it impossible to get away before she was upon him. A gentle hand touched his side and, looking down, he found her standing directly in front of him. If it weren't for his greater height, they would have been chest to chest.

>"Excuse me." She smiled politely, flattening her palm against his ribs.

>"I, um, hello," he stammered in response, "Look, I'm not really, I mean you're very pretty but-"

>Xander watched in amused amazement as the young lady increased the pressure of her hand and eased Gabriel aside, creating a narrow opening for herself and squeezing through.

>"That was slick." he grinned, slapping Gabriel across the back and watching the girl walk away, "I haven't seen a foot to mouth transplant like that since high school."

>Gabriel's cheeks flushed scarlet and he gave Xander a half-hearted shove, "Shut up."

>The brunette wove through the crowd, stopping as she neared Oz. He stood next to her, unaware, watching the band.

>"I know you, don't I?" she turned and smiled, scrunching her face slightly in thought.

>Oz pulled his eyes away from the performers on stage and quirked a thin smile, "Maybe."

>"You're with a band," she realized aloud, pointing at him with a well-manicured finger, "the Pitbulls, right?"

>"Dingoes." He answered shortly with an amicably nod.

>"What?" she cocked her head and lifted her eyebrows.

>"It's Dingoes." He clarified, "Dingoes Ate My Baby."

>"Oh, yeah, right." She smiled, a touch of color rising to her cheeks, "So why aren't you playing here tonight?"

>Across the room, Xander paced within the small space that was available, watching the exchange with mild envy.

>"Can you see that?" he asked Gabriel rhetorically, "Man, I gotta get a band together."

>Glumly, he turned his gaze back to the singer on stage with wistful admiration.

>The performers finished their latest song, drawing out the final notes into a resonant, high-pitched cacophony of noise, and the singer tossed her microphone carelessly behind her, leaping nimbly to the floor.

>Immediately, she was beset by a crowd of hopeful admirers. She grinned broadly, enjoying the attention and encouraging it but not stopping. People parted at her approach, providing a clear pathway for her as she sauntered gracefully away from the stage.

>She paused near one of the bouncers and drew her hand teasingly across his chest, looking him over appraisingly. After a moment, she shook her head, apparently dissatisfied for some reason, and moved on to another young man. He, too, was found wanting in some unknown way and the singer quickly discarded him.

>Xander watched her intensely seductive movements with awe, his mouth gaping as she drew closer. More young men fell under her intense scrutiny and she found something unsatisfactory in all of them, leaving a trail of disappointed faces behind her.

>As she neared Oz and the girl he was talking to, Xander squeezed a few feet closer, hoping to catch the woman's attention.

>"Xander, wait." Gabriel followed after him in alarm, but Xander ignored him.

>The exotic blonde singer looked the young werewolf up and down, blatantly ignoring his conversation companion, and shook her head in disapproval.

>"No." she sighed tiredly, her face screwed into a distasteful expression, "You reek of devotion."

>She tilted her head and turned her beguiling gaze to where Gabriel

and Xander stood side by side. Stroking a long finger across Gabriel's chest, she leered up at him for an instant, then scowled suddenly.

>"You're no good either." She rolled her eyes and dropped her hand, turning from him as if he was no longer in existence.

>Inhaling a long, languorous breath, she grinned at Xander next. Gracefully wrapping her arms around his shoulders, she hooked her hands together behind his neck.

>"You, I like." She traced the tip of her tongue over the edges of her teeth and closed them together in a hungry smile, "You're . . . open-minded."

>Xander's face softened, awestruck, and his mouth worked soundlessly in surprise. The singer inhaled sharply and formed her mouth into the shape of an 'O'.

>Gabriel grabbed hold of the woman's arm and roughly shoved her away from Xander, putting himself between them and intercepting a small cloud of purple mist with his face. He stumbled dizzily and coughed, covering his face with his hands.

>The woman caught her balance and glared at the Seventh Son with hate-filled eyes. Gripping him tightly by the collar, she pulled him in close, their faces almost touching.

>"You're not what I wanted," she hissed, her lip curling angrily, "But you'll have to do. You'll know where to find me."

>Her eyes narrowed dangerously, she shoved him hard and he fell back. If Xander hadn't been there to catch him, he would have certainly hit the floor. Spinning on her heel, she stormed away, into the crowd.

>Oz followed her with his eyes as she rushed past and scratched his head, cocking a perplexed eyebrow.

>"That was . . .odd." he observed, turning his head back toward Gabriel, "You all right, man?"

>Gabriel rubbed his eyes and stepped away from Xander, appearing to still be a little unsteady on his feet.

>"I think so." He answered shortly, blinking his eyes furiously.

>"Serves you right." Xander snorted, "Trying to cut in on my action. Like you even need any."

>Gabriel rubbed again at his eyes and cleared his throat, leaning back against an empty table. Squinting, he craned his neck and looked into the crowd to see where the mysterious singer had gone.

>"What a bitch." The brunette commented with a frown.

>* * *

>Willow peeked out fearfully between her fingers and pulled her knees up, pressing her back against the wall. On the television screen, Brad Pitt was just about to enter another gruesome crime scene.

>"Someone remind me to look at more than just the name on the box next time, okay?" Buffy winced as a mutilated corpse was featured full screen. Hopping off the bed, she went for the VCR, "That's it, I'm shutting it off."

>"No!" Anya implored, sitting up excitedly and reaching out with her hand, spilling crumbs off her sweater and onto the bedsheets, "It's just getting good!"

>"You're kidding right? It's about a twisted serial killer." Buffy hesitated with her finger on the stop button and regarded the girl with raised eyebrows, "With a name like Seven, I figured it had to be good. So far that's been a pretty good number for me."

>"It's not just any killer." The dark-haired girl grinned, "It's the

seven deadly sins. Now THERE is a demon." She paused, scowling prettily in thought, "Or demons. I've never really been clear on that. They all sort of share the same body from what I hear."

>"I didn't know demons had fanclubs." Buffy smirked faintly, "Sorry Anya, but in the interest of Willow ever sleeping again, I'm gonna have to call a veto on this one."

>She clicked off the movie and Anya groaned in protest. Willow slowly lowered her hands from her face and breathed a small sigh of relief. She was as much a guest as Anya tonight, so she hadn't felt confident enough to ask Buffy to shut off the movie, but she was glad that her friend had picked up on her discomfort.

>"Thanks, Buffy." She smiled gratefully. "You'd think that after everything we've been through, I wouldn't get worried over a silly horror movie."

>Buffy set the tape to rewind and smiled at her friend.

>"You probably have more reason to be scared." She said, "Most people think this kind of stuff only happens in the movies."

>"This isn't fair." Anya complained, "I watched YOUR stupid movies. What are we supposed to do now? I wish Xander was here."

>Buffy smiled to herself, imagining that he wouldn't mind spending a night with three girls in a small dorm room either. She wondered what the boys were up to. Hopefully, Gabriel was having a better time than she was. Xander had promised to be nice to him, but she wondered how much of an effort he would put forth.

>"What's up with you and Xander anyway?" she asked, plopping down on the floor with her back against the side of the bed and flipping open a magazine in her lap.

>Anya shifted uncomfortably under the question and folded her arms across her chest. The subject of Xander had become troublesome for her recently and the more she thought about it, the more confused she felt.

>"How would I know?" she fumed quietly, "I've barely seen him since the prom. I just don't understand him. He's different, but then he's not."

>Willow nodded sympathetically. If anyone was familiar with the trials and tribulations of life with Xander Harris, it was her.

>"Hey Will?" Buffy indicated an ad in her magazine depicting a beautiful model with lustrous, loose, curly hair, "How do you think I'd look in curls?"

>"I don't know." She crawled across the foot of the bed and looked over Buffy's shoulder at the magazine, gathering her friend's blonde hair in her hands and holding it up away from her face, "You thinking about getting a perm?"

>"Hm, maybe." She considered absently, filing the idea away for later thought and continuing her search through the pages, "It might be nice for a change."

>Willow rolled onto her side so that she could still see the magazine while facing Anya.

>"I know what you mean about Xander." She sympathized, twining a few locks of Buffy's hair into a small braid with her fingers, "It's like he's there, but he's not there. I don't think that's ever going to change. Welcome to the wonderful world of boys."

>"What are you complaining about?" Anya picked up a pretzel then made a distasteful face and tossed it back in the bowl, "You only have to deal with Oz. He's like the fidelity poster boy."

>"Oh, I don't know." she smiled at the indirect compliment, "Oz has his secret side, too. But if he was up to something though, I think

I'd know."

>Anya unscrewed the top of a bottle of Buffy's nail polish and sniffed it, recoiling from the strong vapors. It was a very pale blue with little glitters in it. She had never thought about painting her nails before, but, noting how good Buffy's polished fingertips looked, she reconsidered.

>"Trust me," she continued, carefully experimenting with painting her pinky under the bright light of a bedside lamp, "I've been studying men's indiscretions for more than a millenium now and I've learned a thing or two. If anything, werewolves are loyal. You don't have anything to worry about. Not like Buffy."

>Buffy and Willow both froze and stared in shock while Anya obliviously continued dabbing at her nails with the tiny brush. After a moment, she became aware of the silence and lifted her head.

>"What?" she raised her eyebrows, exasperated, "I've seen Gabriel's type a dozen times. He's the Seventh Son of a Seventh Son. They see, they conquer, then they leave and find someone new." She looked to Buffy with a serious expression, "He hasn't conquered yet, has he?"

>Buffy felt her cheeks redden and she scowled in disapproval. What she and Gabriel did in their private time was personal, not something she was ready to share with Anya, particularly considering what the girl was implying.

>"I don't think that's any of your business." She answered sourly.

>"Meaning that he hasn't." the dark-haired girl surmised, "At least it means you'll be able to keep him for a little while longer."

>"You don't know Gabriel like I do." Buffy argued hotly, "You may have come across a Seventh Son or two before, but you don't know him. He's not like that."

>While Gabriel tended to lean toward the mysterious side, Buffy felt she understood him better than most, maybe better than anyone. There wasn't a shred of doubt in her mind about whether she could trust him. Her annoyance came mainly from the fact that Anya was trashing her boyfriend for no other reason than the circumstances of his birth.

>"I'm with Buffy," Willow unbound the braid in the blonde's hair and started over, "Gabriel's not the kind of guy to cheat."

>"Whatever," Anya regarded the two of them tolerantly and shrugged, "but I'm betting that wherever the guys took him tonight, he's got his eye on some little floozy in a skirt."

>* * *

>As the music thundered in his ears, Gabriel inhaled deeply and winced, bending forward and pressing his hand to his forehead. It came away wet, but the sweat was cold and his fingers were trembling.

>Xander looked up from his almost constant staring at the girl who was engrossed in conversation with Oz and one of his eyebrows jumped.

>"Hey, man, you alright?" he leaned forward, studying Gabriel's flushed, sweat-glistening face.

>"I feel strange." The Seventh Son squinted his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, a mannerism he seemed to have picked up from his uncle in the past months, "That woman. I've seen her kind before."

>"So have I." Xander snorted with a smirk, "But only when I close my eyes and wish real hard."

>"No." Gabriel leaned back against the wall and stared up at the ceiling, trying to hold his hands steady, "I noticed it just before she grabbed you. She's not human. The Greeks called them lamias, creatures who hypnotize human men so they can mate with them."

>"Who needed to be hypnotized?!" Xander grinned foolishly.

>"Then they devour them alive."

>Xander grin dropped and he rolled his eyes with a groan.

>"No WONDER she came looking for me!" he lamented in exasperation, "Sometimes I think I have a 'fresh meat' sign over my head that only bloodthirsty she-monsters can see. So are we going to stop her?"

>"I can't." Gabriel jammed his eyes shut and staggered against a table, pressing his hand to its surface to catch his balance, "She poisoned me."

>Xander gripped the young man by the shoulders and helped him straighten up.

>"Wait here. I'll go get Oz." He said reassuringly, "Then we're going to get you out of here."

>Reluctantly leaving Gabriel behind, he swiftly slipped through the crowd and covered the short distance to where Oz was still standing next to the dark-haired girl from earlier. She peered interestedly over his shoulder at a photograph in his wallet.

>"This one's from the summer." He pointed to the picture in its clear plastic sleeve, "It's the most recent one I have. She hates getting her picture taken, but I think she's very photogenic. What do you think?"

>"Sure," the girl smiled, "She sounds really nice."

>"Oh yeah," he answered, "Willow's the best. I don't know what I'd do without her."

>Xander pulled himself through a tight space between two hulking men and stumbled, nearly colliding with Oz and his conversation partner.

>"Hey, Xander." Oz greeted, folding up his wallet and slipping it smoothly into his back pocket, "This is Carrie. Carrie, Xander."

>"Hi." She favored him with a brief smile and a wave.

>"Hey." His response was even more perfunctory than hers, "Oz, we gotta go. There's trouble."

>"Hm, I take it Gabriel's gone on ahead?"

>"What?" Xander whirled, catching sight of the table where he had left the Seventh Son, now empty, "I just left him for a second!"

>Oz turned to Carrie and shrugged an apology.

>"Sorry." He offered, "Guy stuff."

>As she nodded in understanding, Xander grabbed Oz by the arm and started dragging him through the crowd.

>"He went out the side." Oz indicated a nearly invisible service door tucked away under the stairs.

>The pair made their way along a slow and frustrating route until they reached the door and pushed outside. The night air was cool and dew had gathered on the grassy hillside, glistening in the weak moonlight.

>"What's up, anyway?" Oz looked back and forth, wondering why Gabriel had not waited for them.

>Xander ran his fingers roughly through his hair and blew out a rough sigh.

>"You know the girl that spit in his face before?"

>"The singer?"

>"Yeah, well that hottie is definitely a nottie. She's some kind of monster. Gabriel called her a lamia. They're supposed to hypnotize poor unfortunate men and then eat them alive."

>"He DID look pretty spaced when I saw him go for the door." Oz nodded thoughtfully, "You think that stuff she spit put some kind of spell over him?"

>"Maybe. He said she poisoned him, but maybe that's what happened." As he scanned the distance, he caught sight of a steady, constant movement near a row of trees and hedges, "Hey, there he is!"

>Gabriel walked in an unerringly straight line, his eyes focused on some distant point on the horizon. Oblivious to sharp branches and prickly leaves, he plowed straight through a thick bush and continued on mindlessly.

>Oz slid carefully down the steep hill, his rubber-soled sneakers slick on the wet grass, and stopped, crouching and instinctively scenting the wind. Xander followed right behind him and slipped, tumbling down the short slope to the bottom.

>"Damn!" he swore, inspecting fresh grass stains along the shoulder of his shirt. It was brand new, less than a week old. "Where's he going?"

>"Straight into trouble." Oz pointed across the way to a busy intersection where the auburn-haired young man was about to cross, heedless to the danger.

>"Aw man," Xander groaned, bolting desperately for the road, "If he gets himself killed, Buffy's gonna shoot me!"

>The two young men ran at top speed while Gabriel wandered into the oncoming traffic. A speeding car blared its horn deafeningly and swerved sharply, narrowly missing the Seventh Son while a second car came to a screeching halt just a few feet short of him. The irate driver leaned out the open window, shouting curses and shaking his fist angrily. Gabriel continued on course along a side street, parallel to the sidewalk and completely unaware.

>Xander and Oz slowed and paused for a short rest, relieved that Gabriel had crossed unharmed.

>"We're lucky." Oz noted, "He's safe."

>Xander glanced farther up the street, past Gabriel, and his eyes flew wide.

>"Oh no." He gasped, his face going pale, "We're not out of the woods yet. Mother of the girlfriend at twelve o'clock."

>He pointed and Oz followed his indication to the far end of the street Gabriel was travelling along. About twenty feet ahead of the auburn-haired youth, Joyce was walking down the sidewalk, headed directly for him.

>Without a word, both Oz and Xander dashed across the road and up the sidewalk, just as Joyce was nearing Gabriel.

>"Oh, hi, Gabriel." She greeted him pleasantly, "You're not out with Buffy tonight?"

>Gabriel ignored her, staring straight ahead and continuing blindly past her toward his unknown destination. Joyce frowned, feeling slighted by his blatant rudeness, and pursed her lips.

>Xander skidded to a stop in front of her, flailing his arms to catch his balance. Oz slowed and nodded once before pointing in Gabriel's direction and taking off after him.

>"Xander?" Joyce turned her frown on him, "What are you doing here? And what's wrong with Gabriel?"

>"Ah, well, he's, um, well, you see he's. . ." Xander stammered helplessly. How was he supposed to explain this? He was fairly certain that Buffy would not appreciate any friction between Gabriel and her mother. He could tell the truth, but he was more certain that

the Slayer would look even less kindly on him letting Gabriel get caught by some weirdo witch's spell. So he grasped for the only straw he could find.

>"Sleepwalking!" he blurted and instantly regretted it. Sleepwalking? Who the hell was going to believe that without a quart of gin in their system? Xander prided himself on being pretty good with excuses, but even considering the circumstances, he had to admit that this one stunk.

>"Sleepwalking?" Joyce questioned dubiously. Apparently she shared his opinion of the explanation.

>"Oh, yeah, happens all the time." Xander continued feeding her the story, "Couldn't you tell? The glassy eyes, the listless gait? Classic signs."

>The trick with bad fibs was to take them so far and with such conviction as to make the listener question their own conclusions. After all, why would a person put so much effort into such a lame story if they weren't telling the truth? A liar would obviously come up with a better lie.

>"Well, he was acting kind of strange." She considered softly, "Isn't it dangerous for him to be out like that?"

>"Um, yeah, you're right. . ." Xander rubbed tensely at the back of his neck and held his breath. She WAS right. Gotta think quick, Harris, he thought frantically. "It's even more dangerous to wake him. Who knows, he could totally flip out or something."

>That wasn't a bad explanation. If Gabriel really was sleepwalking, Xander wouldn't want to be the one to wake him. His uncle Roary was a sleepwalker and sometimes imagined he was back in the war when he first woke up. Xander could only guess at what dangerous situations from Gabriel's past might haunt him.

>Shifting his gaze nervously up the street, he noted Oz trotting backwards in front of Gabriel, apparently attempting to talk some sense into him with no luck.

>"I better get going." Xander offered quickly, "We'll steer him back to his apartment before he wakes up. Everything will be fine, honest."

>Joyce was looking at him like he was a crazy person, but at least she seemed content to buy his wild story. Since she was aware of Gabriel's special nature and the night-time responsibilities he shared with Buffy, she probably knew something was up, but was a little afraid to hear the truth. Which suited Xander fine.

>Turning, he dashed down the road, following the same straight line that Gabriel had been on. He found Oz standing by the railing of an overpass and peering over the railing. His heart thumped in panic as he realized that Seventh Son's path would have carried him right over the edge.

>"He didn't." He stared blankly at Oz, stunned.

>"Yup." Oz nodded with a tired sigh, "Just got up and hopped over like it was a turnstile at the movies. That's got to be a twenty-five foot drop."

>Xander leaned over the rail and looked down, finding Gabriel's tireless form still marching along an invisible line, straight into a stand of trees.

>"Come on, we gotta hurry." Xander started running to the slope at the end of the overpass, "He's way ahead of us. Good thing we know where he's going."

>"Yeah," Oz took up after him, "Looks like he's got a date with a devil."

>* * *

>Buffy smoothed the guava and avocado mask across her cheeks, leaving

perfect oval shapes uncovered around her eyes. Sitting next to her, reclining in a hard-backed chair, Anya flinched as Willow applied a similar concoction to her face with a soft brush.

>"Relax." Buffy advised, careful to keep her face from moving, "This stuff is great, really shrinks the pores."

>"When I was a demon, I didn't have pores." The dark-haired girl wiggled her nose desperately in an attempt to get at an itch on the tip.

>"Cool!" Willow grinned, setting aside the small, plastic bowl and brush. Buffy shot her a surprised look and her grin turned sheepish.

>"I mean from a beauty secret point of view, of course." She hastily amended.

>Anya peeked the tip of her tongue out from between her teeth and tentatively touched it to the edge of the greenish mask.

>"I don't know about my pores," she dabbed her lips together a few times, "But it tastes okay. You got any crackers?"

>Buffy frowned then quickly forced her brow to unfurrow. Just when she was starting to think that the former demon's company might actually be bearable.

>"Doesn't anyone feed you?" she snapped irritably.

>Willow toyed with the cream coated brush, etching a crude glyph on the inside of her wrist.

>"You know what would be neat?" she asked aloud, elaborating on the symbol until it reached halfway up her forearm, "We could do some witchcraft. Between a Slayer, a former demon and a wicca of no small water if I do say so myself, we could probably work some really major mojo."

>Buffy checked her watch and reached for a clean handtowel, using it to scrub the avocado paste off her face. It wasn't nearly half an hour yet but she was getting tired of sitting still.

>"Uhhh, I don't know, Will." She hedged uncertainly, "It's getting kind of late for mystical mischief."

>The auburn-haired girl sat back on the bed and sighed.

>"I guess you're right. I don't have any of my books with me anyway." She sniffed the sigils she had scrawled on her arm and sampled an experimental taste, "You know, Anya's right, this stuff isn't bad."

>Anya leaned back in her chair and relaxed, adjusting the white towel around her neck. She felt unusually at ease, calmer than she had ever been since losing her demonhood. This Girl's Night idea was cool. Stretching out her foot, she nudged Willow with her toe.

>"Tell me more about Xander." She insisted, her eyes closed and her face turned toward the ceiling, "What does he like in a girl?"

>"Xander?" Buffy was just cleaning off the last vestiges of her beauty mask, "I'm gonna have to go with two lips and a heartbeat. Heartbeat optional in some cases."

>Anya raised her fingertips before her face and cracked her eyelids open, blowing softly on her blue-tinted nails to dry them.

>"How can I get his attention?" She wondered, lightly testing one of her nails with a fingertip, "Maybe I should be more direct."

>Buffy rolled her eyes and smirked, hopping onto her bed and bouncing back against the headboard. She picked up the remote control and clicked on the television again. "This is Xander Harris we're talking about here. What's that thing he always says about linoleum?"

>Willow sat on the edge of the mattress, folding her legs up and tucking her feet under, "Buffy, you know there's more to Xander than that. He really comes through sometimes. Remember when he helped you blow up the Judge?"

>"Yeah," the blonde smirked wryly, "That rocket launcher made a great surprise birthday gift. I guess he does have a touch of the heroic in him from time to time."

>* * *

>Xander leaned heavily against a tree, pressing his forehead into the crook of his elbow and panting raggedly.

>"I'm gonna hurl." He gasped, wiping sweat from his brow, "Oz? What . . . What does a . . . an aneurysm feel like?"

>Oz appeared next to him, calm and stoic as always, and placed a hand on his shoulder. He couldn't run as fast as Xander, but he certainly had more stamina. He was barely even sweating.

>"You're not having an aneurysm." He smirked wryly, "Looks more like a heart attack."

>"Thanks for the comforting observation." Xander moaned ruefully, "How did he take off so fast? I couldn't run like that if Ru Paul was chasing me." then paused and reconsidered, "Come to think of it, maybe I could."

>"Don't think too hard." He gave a slight grave nod, indicating a run down old bungalow, almost hidden in the shadowed shelter of a thick grove of evergreens.

>The place was in poor repair, its structure sagging under it's own weight and the wood heavily ridden with moss and mildew. The windows had been boarded up long ago and the stone foundation was cracked and crumbling. But the front walkway had been freshly swept.

>"He went inside." Oz started for the door, but Xander brought him up short.

>"Hold on." He shook his head, "We don't know what's in there."

>Looking over the crude dwelling distastefully, he drew in a deep breath. He was more than willing to risk his neck to help Gabriel out, particularly since the Seventh Son had ended up in his current situation by protecting Xander from the same fate, but the whole mess was far too familiar.

>"Let's review the facts, shall we?" he began to pace, holding an upturned index finger in the air, "Beautiful woman approaches boy out of the blue. Beautiful woman exits. Boy gets lured into said woman's home. She chats him up, flirts a little and feeds him spiked champagne. The next thing he knows, he's locked up in the basement about to become the father of a nest full of hatchlings, not to mention their first meal."

>Oz cocked a dark eyebrow in his direction, "Flashbacks of Miss French?"

>"Predominantly. But let's not forget Ampata. Or the Bezoar. Okay, that last one was more of a group thing, but it still went after me. Point is, I've got experience with these things."

>"So what do you suggest?"

>"I don't know." He dropped his gaze to the ground in regret, "But we have to do something before it's too late."

>Oz unconsciously checked his watch and his eyes darted to the bungalow's open doorway.

>"It's a bit of a run from here but I think there's a pay phone over on sixty-third." He looked again, worriedly to the doorway, "We could give Buffy a call."

>Xander shook his head in negation.

>"Not enough time. By the time she gets here he could be lamia-chow. Or worse." He peered at the open door worriedly, "Looks like we'll

have to go this one alone."

>With a resigned sigh, he steeled himself and slipped through the doorway. Without the pale moonlight, it took a few instants for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. The inside of the place was in even worse condition than the outside. The walls were damp and slick with slime and mold and the floor was layered with dirty water and neglected trash, consisting of broken furniture, rotting clothes and discarded items of almost every description. The stink of decay permeated the place, surrounding him on all sides.

>Oz appeared next to Xander and wrinkled his nose in disgust.

>"This reminds me of my grandfather's basement. He never throws anything away either." He coughed on the stale air, "Almost smells as bad too."

>Oz held his arm out beside him, across Xander's chest, stopping the taller boy in his tracks. Xander squinted into the gloom and made out a faint feminine figure against the back wall of the decrepit building. There was something strange about the way she moved. It was too fluid for a human form.

>"How dare you enter my home without being invited!" she hissed angrily.

>The singer from the After Dark slunk out of the shadows directly into a beam of weak moonlight that shone in through a hole in the roof. Xander and Oz both stepped back in horror. From the waist up, she looked the same as she had in the club, but her lower half had become like that of a gigantic snake, stretching out behind her in a long, sinuous tail.

>She slithered further into the room and gestured offhandedly behind her, the slitted irises of her eyes boring holes into the two intruders. Gabriel obediently moved to her side and stood still as a statue, his green eyes clouded and intense.

>"Let him go!" Xander demanded in one of his unusually brave moments. Brave because every nerve in his body was screaming at him to run away and yet somehow he managed to still stand his ground.

>"Or what, human?!" the lamia demanded, whipping her serpentine tail from side to side in agitation, "Your friend is mine now. My slave. My mate. My meal."

>She curled her reptile half into a thick coil, surrounding herself with a wall of scaly flesh. Settling down comfortably, she folded her arms over one of the thick ridges and rested her chin on the backs of her hands. Teasingly, she stroked the fine tip of her tail possessively up and down Gabriel's arm.

>"I want them dead, Love." She mentioned languidly, "Now."

>Immediately, he responded, leaping for Oz. Xander tried to intercept him, but, quicker than his eyes could follow, Gabriel's fist snapped into his solar plexus and drove the breath from his lungs. He crumpled to the damp floor, clutching his midsection and gasping for air.

>Oz ducked and slipped under the Seventh Son's reaching arms, running for the other side of the room. Gabriel switched directions smoothly, mirroring his movement, hooking a solid arm around his chest and throwing him hard against the wall.

>The impact stunned him and he stumbled forward a few steps. Gabriel gripped him tightly by the throat and pinned him back against the moldering plaster. The young werewolf strained against the crushing pressure and pried at his friend's hand.

>"Gabriel, snap out of it!" he shouted, kicking the toes of his boots into the young man's shins and trying to jar his senses, "I don't

want to hurt you, man. And I really don't want to GET hurt."

>The Seventh Son just stared at him with empty gold and green eyes, his face coldly blank. Leaning forward, he pressed his palm into Oz's adam's apple.

>Xander crawled across the slick floor, groaning in pain. His lungs burned for air, but he could not force them to draw a breath. Bracing his hands against a damp piece of furniture, he managed to sip in a tiny measure of oxygen. It wasn't much and it tasted like mildew, but, to him, it was like the finest air in the world. His lungs unclenched a little more and he was able to draw them almost half full, enough to enable him to stand again, at least.

>Rising, he kicked a piece of the junk on the floor and it clunked dully on the old wood. It was a sword. Unlike everything else in the place, it was immaculately kept, with a long, shining, saber-like blade and a polished brass basket hilt. Xander picked up the weapon and hefted it experimentally.

>A loud crash sounded behind him and he whirled around, saber in hand. Oz had his palm pressed against Gabriel's jaw, shoving his head back, and struggled to escape the Seventh Son's two-handed grip around his throat. Twisting and squirming, he smashed an awkward left hand across Gabriel's jaw and drove his heel down onto the young man's toes. Gabriel took the blows stoically and flung his smaller opponent roughly to the floor, driving a hard kick into his stomach. Oz folded up and coughed in pain.

>"Stop it!" Xander advanced on Gabriel, displaying the sword and hoping the threat of brandished steel would make his words more convincing, "If you can hear me, stop."

>Gabriel slowly turned away from Oz's crumpled form and started advancing on Xander. The dark-haired young man took a hesitant step back and held the sword out, pointed directly at Gabriel's chest.

>"Get him! Kill him, my wonderful slave!" the lamia crowed gleefully, slithering over next to Oz and snapping her lengthy tail around his upper body in a tight coil.

>Oz gritted his teeth and his face strained as the coil began to tighten, squeezing his arms and rib cage.

>Xander's gaze flicked to the creature and then back to Gabriel worriedly, "I mean it. Stay back. I'll stick you. I don't want to, but I will."

>Gabriel continued to march relentlessly forward and Xander's knees turned to jelly. Cold fear tightened in his stomach and he took another step backward. His hand shook around the hilt of the sword and he lifted it a little in warning.

>"Get back." He advised, "I'm not afraid to use this. I-It's really sharp. Honest."

>Gabriel let the tip of the razor edged steel touch his chest and he paused, looking down at it. He stood, unmoving for a moment, then swiftly clapped his hands together over the blade, trapping it between his palms. With a savage twist, the weapon was wrenched out of Xander's grasp, its tip slicing a shallow cut along the skin of Gabriel's neck.

>Xander stared in stunned amazement. One second he had been holding the sword in his hand, the next it was just gone. Gabriel effortlessly flipped the blade around so that the grip landed perfectly into his waiting hand and raised it over his head to strike.

>"Aw, crap!!" Xander wisely turned and fled for his life as Gabriel brought the sword down in a deadly arc. Xander was sure he felt the wind from the blade's passage less than an inch behind his skull as

it chopped into the floor.

>Scrabbling unsteadily on the moist garbage-covered floor, he skidded and changed directions sharply. Gabriel cut him off with the efficiency of a jungle predator, the sword held in his hands with perfect balance. Reaching down, Xander grabbed onto a rotting chunk of wood that might once have been a small table and threw it into Gabriel's face, turning and fleeing.

>What the heck had he been thinking coming in here? He wasn't hero. He should have listened to Oz and gone to get Buffy. But Gabriel and Oz were in this mess because of him and Xander Harris did not welch on his friends.

>Sliding to a stop in the slick layer of trash, he found himself facing the lamia and almost screamed. She lifted her head from Oz's half-conscious form and leered with a mouthful of needle-like teeth, looking him over the way a butcher would with a side of beef. His breath ragged with terror, he reversed directions and backpedaled wildly only to find Gabriel hoisting the sword like a spear and sizing him up for a throw. Torn, he started to run left, but upon seeing the lamia's roiling tail, changed his mind and went right. The creature had circled her upper body around and he almost collided with her.

>"Ahh!" he cried, recoiling and spinning to face Gabriel and the gleaming sword again, "Aahhhh!"

>As the Seventh Son drew back his arm and prepared to throw, Xander's legs kept wanting to run, scrabbling wildly in all directions, but going nowhere. Gabriel threw and the sword streaked unerringly through the air for Xander's heart.

>"AAAHHHHHH!!!!" he screamed, frozen in terror, his eyes wide and unblinking.

>His legs were shuddering uncontrollably and his knees buckled. Arms pinwheeling, he collapsed and fell flat on his back in the filth. The soaring weapon overshot his prone body and an ear-piercing wail cut through the shabby room. Struggling to rise, Xander turned to see what had happened.

>The lamia writhed in agony, a foot and a half of naked steel buried in her midsection. Her coils loosened and she sprawled, flopping around wildly and spewing thick yellowish blood from her wound. After a few moments, her thrashing slowed then stopped and she was still.

>A strong hand gripped him by the shoulder.

>"Ahh!" Xander flinched and blindly grabbed up a weapon to fight off his attacker.

>Gabriel jumped back out of his reach and held up his hands in surrender.

>"Xander, take it easy."

>Xander relaxed somewhat, recognizing him.

>"Hey, watch it! I almost flattened you there." He held up a soggy piece of cardboard tubing that sagged under its own weight in his hand as proof, "Are you okay now?"

>"Yeah, I think so." He hung his head sheepishly, "As soon as the lamia was dead, it broke her hold on me. Sorry about trying to kill you there. You too, Oz."

>Oz pushed the lamia's thick, heavy coils away from himself and stood up groggily. He pressed his hand gingerly against his ribs and coughed.

>"Same here." He said, shoving the cold-blooded corpse with his foot, "I always hated snakes."

>Xander walked over to the lamia's dead body and stared at it thoughtfully. When he had first seen the creature at the club, he had imagined her to be the most beautiful woman in the world. But looking

at her now, in the light of death, he could see that it had all been illusion, just a part of her ploy to capture him. Up close, her face didn't look human at all.

>"Suddenly, dating a former demon doesn't seem so bad." Xander smirked, looking down at himself and attempting to brush the filth off his shirt with little success.

>"Seems kind of a shame to just leave that here." Oz indicated the sword embedded in the lamia's body, "It looks old."

>Gabriel gripped the hilt of the saber and tugged it out of her corpse. The body jerked once and more yellow blood oozed from the hole in its chest. Eyeing the blade for marks, the auburn-haired youth cleaned it against a sodden pillow as best he could and then handed it to Xander.

>"I think if anyone deserves to keep this, it's you."

>"Me?" Xander raised his eyebrows, "All I did was slip."

>"You mean you didn't purposely get between me and the lamia?"

Gabriel questioned, pressing the ornate weapon into Xander's hand, "I thought it was pretty quick thinking."

>"Well," Xander grinned modestly, holding the sword at arms length to admire it, "It WAS sort of a 'strategic' fall."

>Oz stood close to the door.

>"I don't know about you guys, but I'm about all adventured out."

>"Agreed." Gabriel nodded tiredly, "Let's get out of here and call it a night."

>The three quietly filed out through the doorway and outside. Oz began unconsciously humming the tune to one of the songs the lamia had been singing with his hands jammed into his jacket pockets, while Xander happily swished the blade of his newly acquired trophy back and forth in front of him through the grass. Gabriel paused and gave the run-down hovel one last look and then turned to join his friends.

>* * *

>There was a knock at the door and Buffy rolled lazily toward it on the edge of her bed. With the TV remote balanced on her hip and her eyes half closed, she focused her concentration, trying her best to answer the door solely through the power of her mind. To no surprise, her effort was wasted and the door didn't budge. She could just hear the Amazing Kreski laughing at her now.

>The knock sounded again and Anya looked up from the pages of her magazine and scowled in annoyance, "Aren't you going to get that?"

>Willow jumped to her feet excitedly and ran to the door, "I'll get it!"

>With a quick twist of the knob, she pulled it open, revealing three worn and dirty looking young men standing in the hallway.

>"What HAPPENED to you guys?" she exclaimed, stepping back to let them in, "Oz, you're all bruised!"

>Buffy sat up swiftly, fully awake now, and straightened herself up, smoothing her hair out of her face and tugging at the hem of her t-shirt to try and remove any wrinkles.

>In contrast, Anya didn't seem to be concerned about her appearance in the least, still absorbed in her reading. The edges of her face were still caked with dried avocado mask and her hair was only partially pulled back into a short ponytail, the rest hanging loosely in her eyes.

>Oz entered the room and carefully put his arms around Willow, giving her a soft hug.

>"Went to a club." He explained, "Things got a little out of hand for

a while but we're all okay." He looked to Gabriel knowingly, "No lasting harm done."

>"You went out to a club?" Anya rose instantly to her feet, fixing Xander with a serious expression, "Looking for girls to-?" then she stopped short and looked down at his hand, "You have a sword. And why are you covered in muck?"

>"Long story." He sighed tiredly, "How about I walk you home and I'll tell you all about it."

>"Okay." She agreed brightly, her demeanor doing a complete about-face. Picking up her jacket and quickly pulling it on, she took Xander by the arm and lead him out into the hall, "Bye, everybody."

>As she and Xander disappeared down the corridor, Buffy quirked her lips in mild annoyance.

>"Wow, doesn't take that girl long to jump ship, does it?" she remarked, "And after all the bonding she did . . . with my food."

>Willow slipped on her jacket and hooked an arm around Oz's waist.

>"We should probably get going, too." She fussed with a tiny scratch on the edge of Oz's jaw then turned to face Buffy, "Do you need any help cleaning up before we go?"

>"Naw," the blonde girl waved her off, "You go play nurse. I'll take care of everything here."

>"Okay." Willow and Oz left, arms linked around each other's waists, "Call you tomorrow, okay?"

>"Sure, see ya."

>Gabriel quietly closed the door behind the pair as they left and turned back toward the inside of the room. Buffy smiled sympathetically at his worn expression and patted the space on the bed next to her.

>"So, are you going to tell me what happened?" she asked with a curious smirk.

>As he tiredly trudged over to her, she took his hand and pulled him down to sit beside her.

>"You don't want to know." He groaned softly, slumping against her and laying his head on her shoulder, "I missed you."

>"Yeah, me too." she smirked, stroking his soft auburn hair consolingly, "My night was pretty well of the tiresome variety, too. I really shouldn't have forced the guys on you like that. Guess you're stuck with just me for a little while longer."

>He placed his hand over hers in her lap and released a long, relaxed sigh, his eyes sagging shut contentedly.

>"Oh, no, I had a good time. I'm glad you set this up." He lifted his head long enough to plant an appreciative kiss against her hair before laying it back down on her shoulder, "We're getting together again next week. We're just going to try and keep it a little . . . quieter this time."

>Gabriel yawned and stretched out, resting his head in her lap, while she leaned back against her headboard and absently stroked his forehead. They sat in silence for a while, each taking comfort in the other's presence. After a few more minutes, she looked down at him and frowned in perplexed thought.

>"I got the weirdest call from my Mom tonight." She mentioned, "She kept asking me about your 'condition' and if I knew anything about it. Do you have any idea what she was talking about?"

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>AUTHOR'S NOTE

>For those of you who may be interested in the rest of the series

and/or may have missed a piece or two of it, below is a list of the stories with short descriptions.

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>
DIVERGENT PATHS - Coinciding with the discovery of an artifact with the power to close the Hellmouth, a mysterious stranger arrives in Sunnydale with abilities that rival the Slayer's. Will he be a powerful ally for her, or bring about her downfall?

>
TO HELL WITH TOMORROW - Thirty-five years into the future and Slaying has taken on a whole new scope. Gabriel Giles attempts to cheat death and learns that things happen for a reason.

>
BAD BLOOD - A familiar face comes to LA, forcing Angel to confront both a violent killer and his lingering feelings for Buffy.

>
RETURNS - Spike and Drusilla return to Sunnydale over the summer, but they aren't the only familiar faces turning up. Planning to steal the powers of the Slayer and Seventh Son, they cast a dark shadow over the reuniting Chosen Ones.

>
POOR MISS EDITH - Before coming to Sunnydale, Spike and Drusilla lived in Prague, Czechoslovakia and battled with a young Gabriel Giles.

>
REDEEMED - Five months after 'The Wish', a new Slayer arrives in Sunnydale to aid the Whitehats and faces off with a very different Seventh Son.

>
BOY'S NIGHT OUT - While the girls have a night to themselves, the boys go looking for fun and run afoul of a demon with a taste for young men.

>
HISTORY - Threatened by the possible return of the Master, Buffy is forced into a hard choice between love and duty.

>
FACING FEARS - Buffy's been dumped and three different men plan to take advantage, Riley, Parker and the newly-reborn Master. Meanwhile, Gabriel is targeted by the Initiative.

>
A DAY IN THE LIFE - When Buffy and Gabriel get turned into children, Willow and Xander must assume the roles of Slayer and Seventh Son. But which is the greater problem, Sunnydale's vampire population or two rambunctious toddlers on the loose?

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End
file.